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ABSTRACT

A writing consultant to a biology department at first sought to re-empower students by granting them access to their own language and meaning-making capabilities and to relocate students as the locus of knowledge. However, by the end of the fifth semester, the consultant came to value the process of change itself more than initial commitments and their particular effects. The consultant initially focused on the problematic dimension of the tenuousness of curriculum changes rather than their significance. Eventually, the consultant came to value potential change, rooted in the interplay of apparent contradictions, as a generative chaos. The real issue is ultimately not whether a consultant effects institutional change, but rather how he or she views the institution and its relationship with his/her own agenda, and how he or she negotiates these often dissonant perceptions to shape writing-across-the-curriculum practices. It is the inner dialogue between a consultant's perception of an institution's constraints and his/her own ideology where institutional change begins. (RS)

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Effecting Institutional Change Through Writing Across the Curriculum: Ideology and Inner Dialogue

The proliferation of writing-across-the-curriculum programs during the last twenty or so years holds common a concern for effecting change, although the goals of this change vary. Elaine Maimon, for instance, seeks change in the instruction of disciplinary writing by granting students access to the language of the academy. Toby Fulwiler and Art Young seek change in the process of meaning-making, itself, creating expressive opportunities which enhance prose fluency. Parker and Goodkin seek to change perceptions of the political ramifications of programs across the curriculum. Knoblauch and Brannon seek to change the complexion of the institution itself, as well as cross-disciplinary views of the construction of knowledge. Specifically, they suggest:

> . . . a broader concept of writing-across-the-curriculum, one that makes writing central to courses in disciplines other than English, one that accommodates the expertise of the historian, the biologist, and the engineer, and one that finds justification for writing, not in a concern for displaying commonplace ideas in prefabricated forms, but instead in the potential for new learning implicit in the act of writing itself. (466)

As writing consultant to a biology department for five

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semesters, I, too, desired change. Like these attempts, I sought to re-empower students by granting them access to their own language and meaning-making capabilities. Furthermore, by relocating students as the locus of knowledge and, thus, recasting hierarchical concepts of meaning-making, I sought institutional change, similarly to Parker and Goodkin and Knoblauch and Brannon. In contrast to all of these advocacies of change, however, I ultimately came to value the process of change itself more than my initial commitments and their particular effects.

During the first semester of my two and a half year consultancy, I researched the discipline as a participant/observer, actually taking introductory biology so that I might experience its language practices first-hand and discover how the discipline constructs knowledge. I attended lecture three days a week, participated in weekly labs, read required texts, wrote lab reports, and took the first two exams. I found a model of pedagogy and learning based, not surprisingly, on the dissemination and acquisition of foundational knowledge; learning in biology served to initiate students into a specialized discourse of terms, definitions, and processes intended to insure student acquisition not only of later introductory content, but of upper division material as well.

However, biology's language practices seemed incomplete. Student writing consisted primarily of

note-taking, the answering of multiple choice exams, and the writing of only one to two page pre- and post-lab reports. Student talk in the lectures focused on occasional questions merely to clarify foundational operations and properties, and in the labs on a particular experiment's logistics, with only rare discussion among lab partners regarding an experiment's significance.

One of the most challenging aspects of my initial research was my attempt to keep playing what Peter Elbow calls the "believing game." That is, the language practices of biology differed radically from those in my own classes; because of this, I attempted to refrain from judging them against my own context so that I might understand them more complexly. I found this initially difficult because I perceived in biology's discourse a hierarchy which further inhabited the power relations between "master" teachers and "fledgeling" students.

Yet, in the spirit of Elbow's "believing game," I came to see that this emphasis on foundational knowledge indeed served to initiate students into a broader scientific community. However, I also kept encountering the ideological dissonance of a discourse exclusionary in nature, particularly toward marginalized groups such as women and minorities. Specifically, biology's language practices focused on information gathering and had little to do with conversation. Students primarily worked in

isolation, and the kind of collaborative group work I advocated in my own writing classes was absent in biology's "transmission model." The language practices reinforced what Belenky and her colleagues in Women's Ways of Knowing, refer to as "separate knowing" (102). Thus, students--particularly women--who might approach the making of meaning in more "connected" ways, were often excluded from a pedagogy which didn't present occasions for exploratory and collaborative talk and writing.

Furthermore, biology's pedagogy, though seeming to serve the initiatory function of the discipline, cast students as apprentices who attempt to accumulate enough information to enter the community as full members, not participants who discover new knowledge or pose critical questions regarding the discipline. Thus, the pedagogy actually conflicted with a further goal of the course: to move students to think "independently" about course content. This conflict, coupled with the exclusionary nature of the discourse, weakened--ironically--student potential to acquire the very foundational knowledge necessary to gain access to this community.

As consultant, I hoped to not only grant all knowers--including those who come to the world in more connected ways--access into biology's formulaic canon, but to actually, and perhaps paradoxically, reshape notions of scientific canonicity. I believed the best way to serve

biology's needs of increasing independent thought and cultivating acquisition of foundational knowledge, as well as promoting my own agenda of getting teachers and students to critically examine the discipline, lay in recasting the status of students from apprentices to participants. Thus, I recommended discourse situations which would grant them additional authority, and in which language would come to be seen as working reciprocally with knowledge. Following the lead of James Britton, particularly his concept of "shaping at the point of utterance," I hoped to increase prose fluency by introducing contexts for informal writing and talk, as well as infusing these with a more Freireian perspective which critically examined the discipline within a broader cultural context. Thus, students would not only write across the curriculum but against it.

After my initial semester as student/researcher in biology, the coordinator of the introductory program invited me to continue working with the teaching assistants assigned to teach the labs where most of the writing occurred. Though the coordinator wanted me to be available for her and her TA's, she nor they knew what, exactly, they hoped my presence would accomplish--only what they didn't want: extra work and practices which were not consonant with the philosophies of biology, rooted as they were in positivism. Besides warnings not to overwork her already skeptical TA's, her only request was for "practical"

suggestions to enhance "clarity," as she put it, though when pressed she (as anyone might) found it difficult to actually characterize "clear writing," except that it "flowed" and was "specific."

She met my suggestions for journal writing and group workshops with an array of obstacles which ranged from disbelief in the applicability of informal writing, to lack of time to integrate changes into the already packed syllabus, to TA skepticism and lack of commitment to the writing-across-the-curriculum initiative.

I, indeed, soon discovered that the instructors thought my presence meant extra work. They believed, further, that an "English" instructor knew little regarding language practices in life sciences. To most of them, writing teachers were either grammarians or creative writers. Thus, I not only encountered a rigid curriculum but felt that I needed to educate, in effect, the faculty in current theories of composing, so that we would have a common ground from which to talk. Besides needing to win their trust, I found myself in the rather precarious position of having to negotiate between my own ideology and that of biology. My commitments seemed divergent. On the one hand, I aspired to effect institutional change; yet, on the other, my role appeared to be one of service to this neighboring department, especially as I was one of only a few representatives of a relatively new writing-across-the-

curriculum program and was aware of my home department's desire to maintain sound relations across disciplines.

This was not an easy situation to accommodate, particularly because the biology instructors were not inclined to talk about teaching. In an attempt to find common ground from which to converse, then, and to lessen the hostility of an already suspicious faculty, I shifted my emphasis from exporting a student-centered pedagogy to keeping the conversation going. In doing so, I approached each TA individually and deepened my research by casting myself as learner, discovering as much about biology as possible. With each instructor, I negotiated my position and distributed my "authority" as a writing "specialist," thus, modeling, tacitly, a student-centered pedagogy.

My persistence seemed to pay off. My enthusiasm, commitment, and concern for the teacher's needs was contagious. I attended weekly staff meetings, visited with individuals to discuss instructional methods and issues of evaluation, accepted invitations to visit classes to conduct writing activities, and occasionally presented writing workshops to the entire introductory-course staff. The following semester, a core group of these instructors, though busy with teaching and research, actually volunteered to participate in a colloquium, "The Teaching of Writing in Biology" in which I continued to introduce expressive and dialogical approaches to writing

instruction.

The instructors became increasingly interested in these concepts and even grew to trust me when I would problematize their current model of teaching with regard to classroom authority and power relations, though their values inevitably came down on the side of a teacher-centered classroom. Still, I initially held that what really mattered was our continuing conversations. Within our dialogue lay the potential for change.

And that is precisely what occurred. One important change was that these instructors became enthusiastic about journal writing, particularly after a workshop on some of Toby Fulwiler's ideas. Furthermore, dialogue began appearing in their labs in the form of peer response to writing. In the wake of these successes, the coordinator initiated a journal requirement throughout the introductory program.

From my standpoint, these curriculum changes represented important steps in helping break down institutional hierarchies and re-empower disenfranchised students. However, I have also discovered just how tenuous these changes can be when process models are introduced across the curriculum. Expressive and dialogical models, exported into a community which does not share the same world view, can become prey to an appropriation which may deepen, ironically, the very hierarchies these processes

seek to dislodge. Instructors who hold epistemologies rooted in foundational knowledge and positivism, may use process approaches in ways which reinforce both the exclusionary nature of the discourse and institutional hierarchies. Without commitment to dialogical contexts, for instance, journal writing was perceived by these instructors as a means for improving more formal pieces and not valued in itself, as I had intended, as legitimate scientific discourse.

Furthermore, after one particular colloquium, one instructor expressed dismay over my politicizing writing instruction in ways which posed problems with the epistemology of positivism and its impact on power relations within the classroom, as well as within his department itself. In other words, the instructors were willing to bring the practical "how-to" activities into their classes but did not accept their accompanying world views. However, as Parker and Goodkin suggest, the success of process approaches requires a shift from perceiving language as "neutral," or as "a transmission medium only," to viewing it as participatory in knowledge construction (3). Without such a conceptual shift on the part of teachers, as well as the consultants who bring writing-to-learn to them, the success of writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives, as Parker and Goodkin argue, is indeed seriously threatened.

Since the TA's appropriated process approaches without committing themselves to their deeper implications, these curriculum changes appeared tenuous, and I began viewing the consultancy as reinforcing the very institutional hierarchies I wished to dislodge, or as Elbow might call it, "bamboozling" students (87).

The tendency of a consultant might be to focus, as I initially did, on the problematic dimension of the tenuousness rather than its significance. Eventually, I came to value potential change, rooted in the interplay of apparent contradictions, as a generative chaos. Just as Britton describes the relationship between language and knowledge as "order com[ing] out of disorder" (41), I, too, needed to reconceive the "text" a consultant "composes" when she goes to another discipline. My perspective resulted, in part, from reading a journal the coordinator wrote on journal writing. In it, she revealed--for the first time in, at that point, three semesters--a complexity of thought regarding the impact of her department's stratification on the potential success of the new journal initiative. As I read her entry, I recognized that the dialogical aspects through which I had been consulting--such as negotiating my position with teachers, modeling instead of imposing methods of facilitative response, and creating situations in which we could talk informally about teaching--were indeed working. They had

allowed her to express concerns she may not have otherwise; this expression could lead to more significant and lasting change because the concerns were rooted not only in theories of an "outside" consultant but in issues of practice which she found personally meaningful.

My role as consultant had been complicated by the lack of any substantial discussion in writing-across-the-curriculum studies which addressed not only the public relations aspect of such a liaison, but also the inner dialogue a consultant might experience as she finds herself negotiating her own ideology with that of teachers in other disciplines, particularly when her ideology conflicts with theirs, and perhaps more significantly--and ironically--when it encounters the consequences of its own practice.

The real issue, I came to realize, is ultimately not whether a consultant effects institutional change, but rather how she views the institution and its relationship with her own agenda, and how she negotiates these often dissonant perceptions to shape writing-across-the-curriculum practices. In my own case, my rejection of positivistic models to measure successful scientific writing conflicted with my desire to measure the success of exploratory approaches in dislodging institutional hierarchies. As C. H. Knoblauch discusses in "Rhetorical Constructions: Dialogue and Commitment," a dialogical ideology--if it is to be truly dialogical--must indeed

present opportunities for critical examination of its own position (138). This, I want to argue, is not to suggest that a consultant abandon her ideological commitments, but that she make them more complex by including an apparatus for self-critique that, in effect, deepens the dialogic. In other words, just as I urged instructors to examine their ideologies, I, too, needed to reexamine my own.

The exploratory approaches I introduced, when viewed through a positivistic lens, may indeed be problematic because their successes may not be readily apparent nor measurable. However, if viewed through a fluid model--such as James Britton's, or Ann Berthoff's "learning the uses of chaos"--which recognizes chaos as a necessary condition in the quest for clarity, the tenuousness of change can indeed become generative. It is the inner dialogue between a consultant's perception of an institution's constraints and her own ideology where institutional change begins.

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